Nesbitt-Johnston Writing Center
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Responding Efficiently to Student Writing

Ungraded writing

There is no reason why you have to read all of your students' writing; ungraded writing is a useful part of the learning process. Benefits of ungraded assignments include a check on reading comprehension, preparation for class discussion, exploration of new topics, and development of a set of informal responses as a basis for later assignments.

Graded writing: early drafts v. final drafts

Ideally, all writing assignments should allow for the full writing process: pre-writing, early drafts, reader feedback, revision, and final draft. Instructor responses differ depending on where the writer is in the writing process. For a discussion of responding to early drafts, see the enclosed document.

Assignment Design

Start with designing the assignment to get a manageable, focused result.

Identify a specific focus for the assignment. Consider focusing on specific topical and writing concerns: Paper One: thesis and paragraph structure; Paper Two: selection and integration of evidence; Paper Three: more complex analysis, etc. Clearly communicate the assignment's focus to your students, and keep it in mind when evaluating the final draft. Also remember to specify the intended audience (students in the class, students not in the class, …).

Build multiple drafts and revision into the assignment. Ensure that your students write early drafts and use readers to identify areas needing revision. Collect early drafts along with final drafts. Possible readers of drafts include you, classmates, and Writing Center tutors.

Consider the assignment length. How long does the paper have to be for a full response? Will three focused pages suffice? If so, then why ask for five?

Stagger due dates so you have fewer papers to read at one time. You will be reading papers almost every week but fewer at once.

Responding to Final Drafts

For the first reading, give priority to *understanding* the paper, not grading it. Read receptively. Look for patterns to address.

Think of your comments as part of an on-going dialogue with your students on their writing. Tailor comments to the specific writing and thinking needs of the individual student.

The need for extensive comments on final drafts will be reduced if you've already provided substantive comments on earlier drafts.

Two types of comments

End comments to discuss your overall response to the paper and
Marginal comments on specific ideas and surface concerns: style, grammar, and mechanics.

End comments

Focus on instructive comments that prompt further thinking. Respond as a fellow writer or as reader. Explain how the paper was successful and where it fell short: "I understand your thinking up to page three, but I do not see the connection between …."

Focus on instructive end comments. Ask yourself, "What are the most important responses I can provide to help the student see how to improve this paper and to become a better writer?"

Emphasize prescriptive comments and questions: "How can you extend this idea to include the counterargument raised in the other reading?"

Develop a set of comments to address mistakes students commonly make on this or similar assignments. (See example, enclosed.) The comments may focus on typical misreadings of the text, missteps in the argument, or writing problems.

Nancy Sommers's study of Harvard undergraduates found that students most valued the following types of comments:

- questions that stimulate further thought
- brief summaries of what the reader got out of the paper
- descriptions of difficulties the reader encountered
- critical feedback that was constructive and respectful. (Gottschalk and Hjortshoj 53)

Marginal comments

Avoid over-editing. Consider how much can the student absorb and learn. If you can't restrain yourself, limit full editing to a portion of the text.

Avoid rewriting sentences. Instead, give prompts that help the student to rewrite: e.g., "Delete 'there are many examples of...'; move [insert actual noun subject] to the subject position."

For annoying, recurring errors--its/it's, affect/effect--make the student correct ALL of them. Develop your personal list of what you will not accept, and add the list to assignments.

Use editing symbols as shorthand. See suggested symbols in college materials: "Essentials of Writing" (Hamilton's style sheet), "Common Errors" (from the Writing Center), or develop your own list.

Grading

"The proper place of grading is at the end of the process of reading and responding to student papers, not at the beginning" (Gottschalk and Hjortshoj 49). See sample grading rubrics, enclosed.

A final step: correction and revision

Have students correct surface errors and/or revise portions. This will not be a time-saver for you, because you need to check their work, but it is an important step for students.

Works Cited

Gottschalk, Katherine, and Keith Hjortshoj. *The Elements of Teaching Writing*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004.